

“A Schizophrenic Perspective”

Blog Posts Part 3

More Prose By Matthew Freeman

I asked poet Matt Freeman to write a work of prose from the point of view of a "sane" person. Oddly enough, I find his work to be essentially identical to the work of a person who is "sane".

What separates Matt's work from that of a healthy writer? The self-doubt, the awkwardness, the hope-- I think we've all felt similarly. Is it just that Matt "knows" that he has schizophrenia? Or is there something deeper? I can only wonder.

If a person can imagine it, personify it-- can it be? If not, then why not?

Referential Quotidian

As I write this while listening to clear Vivaldi I've come to realize that I am at an interesting and rather invisible point in my recovery where mostly I keep my mouth shut and walk down Delmar and smile at everyone like my salesman father in his best mood and no matter how bad it gets I am generally grateful for all of the miracles that have occurred beyond belief and I'm still surprised I think somehow I have entered this season where against all temptation to really let loose I have kept taking my meds and have not picked up that huge glass of beer and no matter what fear I can run my little workshop or sing my songs and I feel now I'm in the serious experience of explaining how this so-called and highly valued insight-- like that little sign could mean me or the loud window slamming in the alley or the pen in the parking lot as I walk my way to the library or maybe Jakob Dylan had hear of me in New York etc. and all this same old stuff I can doubt—none of this ability to discount certain affects came overnight but was the result of sitting hours in a room where everyone was suggesting mildly that I was crazy and because I didn't want to be known as crazy I was mostly stiff and silent trying to think things through and I might have blurted a few times “are you guys mad at me” so that in twenty years I have gone and learned something which mainly is consigned to silence in conversation but which comes out in my poems and especially my new songs because who really has dissected paranoia or the possibility of a mic in your heating vent in a simple popular song and clearly that's the bomb shit and the given and the one thought to the bitter end of clear beautiful sanity that can in no way be won by evasion or continual in and out of the hospital and as I have pointed out in an embarrassed way we are so very close to heaven and things are plain and near and people are a fun mystery and I thank all the nurses and doctors and all of my friends and family for helping me along the river of vision which is beset on all sides by the wilderness of terror and I shall remain as I am despite all blocking devices.

Some Questions

Are a failure to adapt and disability the same thing?

Can a person struggle to assimilate, while remaining able?

Could disability, at least in part, arise mainly from a continued struggle to assimilate-- and what does this suggest?

On the flip side-- if a person was a healthcare professional-- doctor, caseworker, public safety officer-- and a person failed to assimilate-- what would be the next step?

Why do some people have a hard time fitting in, and what is there to do about that?

Hard Holidays

I have a friend who is a psychiatrist. He told me that the holidays are his most active time, when many people suffer extremes of emotion, calling out for help.

From my social media feed, I can see that this is the case. A number of people are asking for support, and some providing it.

I remember when I was in college. At the time, I did not want to have anything to do with my family, so I spent a Christmas holiday in my fraternity house.

Everyone left the house, and near-silence settled in. I quickly realized my mistake. I was all alone, with nothing to do, in the brutal Chicago December.

I sat around, helpless, for a number of hours, listening to the wind blowing outside.

There was a knock on my door.

It was my fraternity brother, John. He had made a large pot of spaghetti, and had more than he needed. He generously offered it to me.

It was my sustenance for most of the weekend.

My thanks to John, and people like him.

If you are hungry, in whatever way, may there be sustenance for you on this holiday.

"Skim Milk, Cream"

A Poem By Thomas Park

In the painting, the poet
Sat calmly at his desk, feathered pen in hand

Myself, I was visiting a friend
Out of money, mind blurry
From illness

Perhaps that was one of several times
That I went off of my meds
To prove my ability

Jake let me into his apartment
He had tracked my degeneration
Watched me get sick

He set a cd on the floor, spun it
Spoke to me of truth, hallucination
Light reflected off of the disc's metal surface

He handed me a jar of pennies and nickels

I left the apartment

I carried the coins to the bus stop,
(They would help with fare home
And food for some days)

The bus door opened, my pants,
Too large, began to fall down

Pulling them up, I dropped the change jar

The bus of commuters
Watched mutely as hundreds of pennies and nickels
Spilled in the steps of the bus
On the street, the sidewalk

Observed patiently as I picked them up
Frantically, with great shame

I gave a few of Jake's coins to the driver
And started my journey home

At this point, you might imagine
That I am cleaning my poet's pen
And returning it to its jar

As the writer Philip K. Dick suggests,
"Things Are Not Always As They Seem
Skim Milk Masquerades As Cream".

The Power To Deny

My schizophrenia has resulted in a certain type of sensitivity. I don't want to indicate that reality has a formless, absurd quality-- I don't want to deny anything-- or, at least, without affirming something else that is equally viable.

I have to end every phrase on an "up" note. I am afraid to seem negative, or to bring people down.

Through work experiences, and as a result of getting older, I am picking up a new technique-- the power to deny.

Much can be accomplished in life by suggesting things, coming up with more and more ideas, and more and more encouragement.

At a certain point, a person has to negate things, as well.

In a work environment, since I often play a role of watcher-- sitting quietly, observing a space, and making sure that everything stays as it should be, I find that my thoughts tend towards temptations. My point then is to deny those temptations.

Indeed, for many periods of time, I seem to be conceiving of temptations, and simply nullifying them using my mind and will-power.

Thoughts that don't help need to be eradicated, before they are realized.

That is why I often exercise-- my "Power To Deny".

My Place In The Corner

I am not afraid of holidays, as some people are. I do not have seasonal affective disorder. I also have no special reason not to look forward to Christmas.

But, what can I say-- it is true that being 46 and schizophrenic is different than being 12 and healthy-- and this seems especially true on Christmas.

And that's ok. Recent years, I am no longer the center of attention, making a huge pile of wrapping paper, and shouting about everything I open.

There is still a place for me, in the corner, from which I can watch the rest of my family celebrating.

I feel fortunate, just to be alive on this day, to be forgiven my sins by Christ, and to celebrate his birth with family.

My thoughts go to the sick, and, especially to those stuck outside, with nowhere warm to sleep or rest. May God protect them.

And to those alone, please realize-- you are not really alone. You are just sitting in your own corner, like I will be, and many like me-- and many like you.

I hope you can find peace nonetheless.

Merry Christmas!

What Do We Do?

Say you are mentally ill, or an advocate for the mentally ill, or are related to or friends with someone who has a mental illness. You have been reading this blog. Maybe you agree with some of its points, or benefit from the thoughts offered here.

What would I have you do?

I don't want anyone to try to start a revolution. A new paradigm may be on its way for mental health treatment, but I am not asking people to hold up signs, boycott clinics, confront healthcare professionals, or call Senators.

I don't want you to do nothing, however. If you read this blog, simply digest it, and go on with things, that would make me feel like this effort is being wasted.

What I would suggest is that I have been presenting people with some new perspectives about what it's like to have schizophrenia, and how the greater modern reality involves and reflects aspects of mental illness.

I would ask that people who are not mentally ill try to resist the urge to categorize schizophrenic people as being existentially inferior or completely disabled. Their abilities might surprise you.

I would also request that schizophrenics and other mentally ill people realize that they may have hidden resources, and therefore they should not give up and become consumers in every way.

I am really asking for some slight changes in attitude-- changes that would only benefit people by raising their levels of consciousness.

"What To Do With Words"

A Poem By Thomas Park

You could pretend they were warm
And wear them
(The approaching cold would feel only sharper)

Use them like a bullhorn, try
To herd people
(They are like cats, and would go their own way)

Words could indicate objects
(Which you would miss when they were gone)

I could tell your story
With words
(But it might make you feel uncomfortable)

Maybe I will play an old record,
"Disintegration"
And drag you down with me
Using words

Words best suggest, without proving
Admit to frustration, without resolving

Words connect us, like strained nerves

Reflect unfulfillment
Narrate human effort

Testify
Our
Testaments
Our
Testimonials

Sanity And Ability

As the months go by, I become more and more aware of what I am trying to convey with this blog.

I think that one of my main goals might be to suggest that 2 words do not mean the same thing.

"Sanity" and "ability" are not synonyms.

In other words, I believe that a person might be sane and not able. Perhaps they are mentally healthy, but, for other reasons, struggle to survive in today's world. They might have a physical limitation, or have other roadblocks getting in the way of being competitive.

A person might also be insane and able. Insane people are traditionally called "disabled". There are many examples of mentally ill people who were quite able, in many ways-- from John Nash to Syd Barrett, to (possibly) people like Nijinsky, Vincent van Gogh, and others.

Hence, when we say that someone is mentally ill, I believe that we really are referring to certain particular symptoms, and not to an all-around lack of ability.

To me, that is an important distinction. It asks healthy people to keep open minds about schizophrenia. It allows schizophrenics to feel hope that they still might be able to do great things.

What If. . . I Were Sane?

Today, my wife sent me a very nice message. She said that she had been learning about Brian Wilson (of "The Beach Boys"). Apparently, he had been given a diagnosis of schizophrenia, but when he admitted that hearing voices was his only symptom, his diagnosis was changed.

My wife suggested that, because my main symptom is also hearing voices, that I might also not be schizophrenic.

I had this moment. What would life be like? What if I could regard myself as normal, as fully functional? I felt my ego beginning to swell.

Reality settled in pretty quickly. According to the voices symptom, if they constitute a steady pattern, that connotes a psychosis. And, to be honest, for me, they do.

When I am alone, I sense voices in my mind continuously.

What a nice thing for my wife to say. It gave me hope.

For a strange moment, I peered through the veil, and saw myself as maybe being healthy.

Old Music Videos

On New Year's Eve, I watched a lot of old music videos. They really brought back some memories-- admittedly, I had some strong emotional reactions. I tend to bottle up my feelings a lot, so that may be part of the issue.

I wrote earlier about how MTV, and music videos in general, changed the way we experienced media as young men and women. I still believe that.

Sometimes, though-- I wonder if maybe there are some things that really never change about life.

Watching the goofy Cyndi Lauper sing about girls wanting to have fun reminded me that I don't really have fun the way I did when I was a kid. Between my teenage years and 46-- there's a lot of distance. The decade spent alone seems particularly to have made my childhood feel like it was a very long time ago.

Cyndi Lauper also reminded me that there are lots of healthy people who still like to have fun, and I really should be ok with that. Sometimes, partly because of my age and partly because of my schizophrenia, I tend to ignore people when they are being silly. I wonder if life is maybe too short to be that way.

I watched the Fine Young Cannibals sing, "She Drives Me Crazy". I don't think that they meant that to be taken literally. Of course, the lyrics refer to the good and bad vibes a man gets from a woman, and how that can affect him. Still, I did wonder if there was some truth to it all, that, indeed, life's way of throwing people the unexpected, and trying to make sense of things that essentially could never be explained, might indeed-- well, drive someone crazy.

I finished with Joy Division's, "Love Will Tear Us Apart". It's a very simple truth, that strong feelings sometimes break through the walls we put around ourselves, no matter how hard we try to prevent this. Maybe these moments are the times that we really transcend the "*jetzeit*"-- when messianic time happens, and we encounter the truth.

Of that, what can be said, other than-- how could we ever really handle such feelings, yet how could they have been beneath the surface all along?

As a whole, my short dj-soliloquy experience was unexpectedly moving. As a schizophrenic, it helps me to remember that healthy people don't only think in healthy ways-- they feel real, healthy feelings, too.

A Note To The Sane

What would I like to say to those of you who are sane?

Life is not easy for anyone, and for sure we all face challenges. We all have our share of pain and uncertainty.

That being said, if you are mentally healthy, you are very fortunate.

You can count yourselves as part of a world community that basically "gets it". You can realize that, when you perceive things, and when you react to them, you are displaying a general sense of stability.

You can start from the assumption that you are right about things-- and you can go on from there.

There may be those who disagree with you, sane people.

But, when you go to your rest, you can know that you were deemed among those who knew about life, who saw things the right way, or at least who avoided being so eccentric that they were deemed sick.

So-- to you who are whole in the head-- I ask that you give yourselves a moment of appreciation. Life accepts you, and essentially accepts your perspective.

You are, in that respect, very lucky indeed.

When you speak a truth, may people believe it. When you cite a source, may people accept it. When you express a view, may people give it credence. This is your world-- it was written by others like you and will probably be handed to others who are like you, as well.

Reality By A Thin Thread

How is it that the President of the United States is using nuclear war as a rhetorical tool?

If he is serious about nuclear engagement, I find that to be dangerous and possibly not demonstrating mental acuity.

If he is joking or posturing about nuclear war, especially with the likes of militant North Korea, that does not seem healthy either.

To those who love life, love themselves, their families, their friends-- nuclear war is no laughing matter, and no tool for rhetoric.

Threatening to use weapons that way crosses a line.

I realize that I am schizophrenic, but I can't help but notice how crazy this world can seem.

Some Thoughts From Bob Nemtusak

I asked an old friend of mine, who happens also to be a writer who suffers from mental illness, to pen a few words about his impressions of sanity. Here is what he kindly offered:

"Self-analysis is a tricky thing.

Often enough, honesty is the best policy.

Often enough, it pays to speak your mind, and encourage others to do the same.

Then again, it's a strange world.

Sometimes there's pressure. Pressure, to "go along, to get along." You can hunt high and low, for deep, meaningful, "soul to soul" conversation.

Often enough, you settle.

You settle for banter about weather.

Everybody's experience has value.

Sure, it's a comfort, in troubled times, to declare "the insane have taken over the asylum." Or, if you're a control freak, to demand a tightly-run asylum.

Truth is, nobody's truth is any more or less valid, than the next guy's.

For me, a sane world view takes work.

It takes being true to your self.

Indeed, it's folly, for me, to use a word like "consensus."

For instance.

The sky is either blue...or it isn't.

No expert is going to change the sky's color.

Anyway, that's my opinion.

Some folks will disagree. They'll say, the truth depends on opinion polls. And across four years of philosophy studies, I heard lots of opinions about—or excuses for—dancing around the truth. But truth is such a loaded word.

I actually read where a rabbi says: he'll take God, over the truth, any day.

Sounds right to me. It's a comfort, knowing somebody knows better than me."— 2018, Bob Nemtusak

Often A Dream, Sometimes A Nightmare

I have to say that people who are mentally ill and sane people can have a lot in common.

I haven't mentioned the disjointed nature of modernity recently here in this blog-- things have gotten a bit more personal, and we've had some guest writers, as well.

The notion had been suggested that the pace of modern life is brutal enough that there are many who struggle to cope-- be they mentally healthy or not.

From a more subjective point of view-- a friend, who is, as far as I know, mentally sound, told me how his life was, once.

He said, roughly, "Oftentimes a dream, occasionally a nightmare."

I can definitely identify with his description. With all of the technology and conveniences of life today, we can exist in dreamlike states much of the time, feeling relatively comfortable, things being as they should be.

It's just that, now and then, things suddenly plunge and get worse, particularly for short periods of time.

It's the same for me-- though I am schizophrenic, life has that same general rhythm.

I am guessing that my friend and I are not alone.

Two Poems For Matthew Freeman

"To Matt Freeman"

By Thomas Park

Went to the psychiatrist last week

She was pleasant enough, friendly
Seemed interested most
When I confessed
To my 5% rage issue

Really? She asked, eyes wide,
This is the first time in 20 years
You've admitted to not being
Perpetually calm

I close my eyes, music
Fills the room, It's
Morrison

My memory of my Dr. shifts
She disappears into her
Suit, I don't know
If she is getting smaller
Or it bigger

The clinic room somehow
Opens to the desert-- It's
Matt Freeman,
He's leading a circle
Of people, holding hands

They turn to me, Matt
Looks up, sees beyond me
Sees my shrink
Knows what I am about to say

"Was she amused", Matt asks,
"About the 'always seeming calm thing'?"

In an utterly inoffensive way,
I feel that Matt, in his mild,
Slightly nasal voice, is
About to tell me,

"I told you so."

"To Matt Freeman Part 2"

By Thomas Park

A liver may not forgive
But God can

A person who lacks
Today's current mindless resolve
An intellectual
In a world afraid of books
Can we forgive, can God forgive
A discourse deeper
Than that of a college fraternity house
Worse, can we forgive, can God forgive
A man who is free
Until he forgives himself

There is a Door in the world
Not Death,
Calls out to you

Matt, can you forgive
Us

A Possible Conclusion

As interest in posts is currently on the wane, and I feel that I have covered quite a bit of what I had intended, I am deciding to conclude this blog for now.

I would like especially to thank those who came by to read this blog, to offer their comments, and those who gave a little more, like Matthew Freeman and Bob Nemtusak. These latter two gentlemen offered original content for the blog.

As I continued to write my own entries, I noticed that I often had to reference my schizophrenia as a sort of tie-in. It seemed that the journal became less and less about mental illness and more about the human experience itself.

That being said, I did want to restate what I think was my most important realization through the blogging process- that "sanity" and "ability" are not the same things-- that a person can, in fact, be clinically insane and still highly able-- even a contributing member to society.

Thanks to you all, and farewell.

